



## “Practicing Our Faith: Discern the Spirit”

1 John 4:1-6

August 22, 2021

Take a few seconds to consider the last *major* decision you made. Or perhaps a major decision you are facing right now.

I acknowledge that the definition of “major” is relative to both context and to individuals. For some, like the youngest two members of our family, which movie to watch on a Friday night is a *major* decision. In our house, it’s one that often comes with an earnest proposal, counter-arguments, and occasionally heated debates that devolve into physical altercations. And, of course, we all make all sorts of decisions in nearly every moment. Our brains can wade through information and stimulus at light speed, communicate our choices to the rest of our body, and act on that choice. Most of the time, that entire process is instinctive and unconscious. And that’s a good thing. Can you imagine how exhausting it would be if each breath we took required conscious thought? Or how dangerous it would be if we had to think about whether or not to remove our hand from a hot stove? Most of the decisions we make do not require a great deal of active deliberation, forethought, or struggle.

But some do. These are the decisions that shape our lives and determine its course. For what vocation or profession should I prepare? With whom should I spend my life? Where do we cut to balance the budget? How will I respond to a friend who has reached out in need? Whom should we choose as our leaders? Which actions and values and virtues will have highest priority in my life? Why did God place me on this planet?

When it comes to these kinds of choices, most of us seek guidance, insight, wisdom, or a sign from elsewhere to point the way forward or affirm us in our decision-making.

We call that practice discernment, and in theological terms, the word has a different meaning—a deeper meaning—than mere judgment or taste. Rather, Christian discernment is an intentional practice through which we seek to align our decisions, especially the major ones, with the will of God in our lives. Discernment is rooted in the conviction that God is not other from our lives, that God is not distant from our world, that God is active, that God cares about your life, that God cares about how you handle the situations you face, and that in each decision, God invites *you* to join in the divine work of healing, compassion, and transformation. The moments that surround our most life-defining decisions can often feel lonely. They can often be anxiety-producing. As you think back to that last major decision or the one you are now facing, you might have that anxious feeling in the pit of your stomach. It might be a decision or a choice that wakes you at four in the morning. *What should I do?* It feels lonely. The practice of discernment assures us that we are not alone in these trying times.

I remember when I was on the verge of a significant decision that I knew would shape the direction of my life and determine which path I would follow. I was afraid in that moment because, as I said to a friend I consulted for advice, no matter which of the choices I made, I would leave so many choices unmade. I would be closing off other paths that seemed viable, interesting, possible, and perhaps God-ordained. The friend looked at me across the table and said, “Have you prayed about it?” Of course I had. “Tell me about those prayers.” As I surveyed my mind, I was a bit embarrassed to say to my friend that my prayers had essentially been tests for God. Ok, God, give me a sign. Write it in the clouds. Speak out loud,

and make it clear to me which way I should go. I was demanding that God respond to my need for clarity. My wise friend asked a pointed question: “What if you tried praying for faithfulness instead?”

My friend took her cue from the First Letter of John—whether she knew it in the moment or not—and this morning’s passage instructing followers of Jesus to “test the spirits.” Quite simply, the criterion for this test, in individual lives and in the communal life of the church, is this: Does the decision I’m about to make move me toward Jesus in faith and toward others in love, or not?

If such instruction seems strange, awkward, or out of place, that’s an observation worth our exploring a bit. As I was preparing this sermon, I heard an advertisement that began with these words: “We all deserve to live happier and more productive lives.” Now, that is certainly an explicit measure for decision-making, and one that, at least in the advertisement, assumes universal acclamation. *Of course we all deserve to live happier and more productive lives. We all deserve happiness and productivity, and therefore we should make choices that increase those values or at least the likelihood of our achieving them.* Choices beginning with purchasing the product being advertised of course.

But what if we believed that our decisions were about more than our own happiness or productivity? What if we used a different standard for discernment, a different test, a different tool for decision-making? I recently heard a podcast interview with a popular author and influencer whose books on self-improvement and personal empowerment have sold millions of copies. At one point, the author talks about the decision to leave organized religion after many years of writing about its positive impact on her life. Here’s how she summarized her rationale for leaving the church behind: “I didn’t want anyone to tell me what to do with my life anymore.” What struck me about that phrase was *not* the reason itself. As a pastor, I’ve heard that one dozens of times. There is nothing novel, original, or creative about

leaving church in pursuit of absolute freedom. What struck me was how incredibly naïve it is to assume that the Christian community is the only source of such authority over us. And this from someone called an *influencer*! I found myself thinking, “At least the church is honest about its influencing.” I will say it now from the pulpit: *Yes, the church wants to tell you what to do with your life*, because we believe that God cares about what you do with your life. The decision is *not* whether you will be shaped by external forces or totally free, but rather which voices you allow to shape your life.

The practice of discernment is the intentional act of allowing your life to be shaped by God and by the community of faith. It is both deeply spiritual and profoundly practical. It is a Christian practice geared toward action. Discernment aims for us to *do* something.

In recent months, as life returned to pre-pandemic patterns, Americans have been quitting their jobs at rates that we haven’t seen in decades, in what some are calling the “take this job and shove it economy.” Much has been made of the high number of people quitting. I’m not an economist, and frankly the ones I read have different views about the many reasons behind this surge in job departures. But the one that intrigues me as a pastor is the possibility that the pandemic provides a period of discernment. Am I doing what God called me to do with this one life I’ve been given? Is there more than this to my working years? How can I make a difference, find meaning, live intentionally? I like to think that at least some of this dramatic increase is attributable to discernment around vocation. Put simply, your vocation is the “why” of your life. It’s the reason you were created.

My favorite insight on the question of vocation comes from the mystic and theologian Howard Thurman, who gave this advice: “Do not ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

In a nutshell, I believe that is the purpose for which each and every one of us was created: to come alive. To find what brings you an undeniable sense of passion and purpose and then pursue it with everything you have. Love God. Love neighbors. Live with integrity. Make life better for someone else. And if your work results in material success, be generous with your resources. If your skills could benefit others, use them to serve. If your most prevalent resource is time, find a way to give that away.

*What makes you come to life?* When have you felt the unmistakable tug of God's Spirit upon your life? That's the purpose for which you were created.

The same is true for the Church. The Church exists to come alive, to be the Body of Christ alive in and for the world. We are not here solely to hold on to what has been, to maintain venerable institutions or preserve proud traditions. This is our turn, as God's people in this moment, to discern the Spirit's call for the time we've been given. Over the last five days, the staff and lay leaders of Second Presbyterian Church have spent some intentional time in discernment. We've asked these kinds of questions about which decisions and paths will lead to more fruitfulness for our congregation, yes, but more importantly for our city, our state, our nation, our world. I can tell you that we are determined to come alive because that is what we believe God is asking of us. We're determined to come alive. We're determined to come alive in new ministries that will reach and serve young adults in our city. We're determined to come alive in mission partnerships that allow for the flourishing of those who are often overlooked or cast aside right in our own zip code. We're determined to come alive in offering a broad welcome for all of God's children who need a place to belong and find meaning and purpose. We're determined to come alive by showing the love of Jesus Christ in how we model community *right here* with those who differ in perspective and outlook. Yes, we are determined to be a place of influence, to influence what happens to the least of these who are members of our family. We are determined to seize the time we've been given to give something back to

the one who gave it. We are determined not to waste, squander, or lose this moment.

I close on a personal note. While serving God and this community alongside all of you is often a greater privilege and joy than I can fully articulate, we must also confess that we've walked through a period of deep pain together—a period that has taken its toll on all of us. I am not immune to this toll. It's been a challenging time. Over these months, I've reflected on my own vocation, and I've been reminded—and maybe it will help you as well—that coming alive isn't always pretty. Coming alive isn't always happy. Coming alive isn't always productive. There are peaks, and there are valleys. Bright sun-soaked mornings and dark nights of the soul. The practice of discernment does not deny these realities. Instead, discernment invites us to reflect on it. To return again and again to the source of our vocation so that we might be faithful in pursuing it.

I return often to a particular moment. When I decided to go to seminary and seek ordination, I was deeply impacted by a short note that I received on May 1, 2000. I was seventeen years old, and I had just preached my first sermon. It was Youth Sunday at Vandalia Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina. That note continues to hold deep meaning for me, both for what it says and for what it does not say. In my father's handwriting, the note reads:

“Dear Chris, I am so very proud of you in so many ways. I hope you know that. I was so proud of you on Sunday. You spoke God's word from your heart—expressing your faith...I have never—and will never—“push” one of my children into ministry. I heard again Sunday the comments of “Chris should be a minister.” I believe you have the gifts to do so, but that may not be the direction God is calling you. I pray that you will always listen to God's leading—as I believe you have been doing. Again, your mother and I are deeply proud of you. Love, Dad”

Let's listen for God's leading and pray for boldness in pursuing it. Let's move toward Jesus in faith and toward the world in love. Friends, all we have are

these precious and fleeting years to come alive and  
make a difference. The Spirit speaks. In discernment,  
we listen and we respond.

Don't miss your call. Don't waste your life. Amen.